

Representations of Fatherhood and Pre-Colonial Masculine Otherness in Flora Nwapa's *Idu* (1970)

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Abstract: Drawing on Nwapa's representations of pre-colonial definitions of West African manhood, I will examine the inter-related ways of the male characters' perception and yet distinctive ways of responding to pre-colonial hegemonic masculinity represented in *Idu*. Moreover, this chapter explores the narrative irony used by Nwapa to redefine notions of producing children, contest polygamy, and interrogate indigenous pre-colonial constructions of manhood in the novel. Her interrogation of indigenous masculinity constructions encourages us to recognize that representations of contemporary masculinities are constantly linked to pre-colonial patriarchal definitions of manhood, as will be shown throughout the following chapters. Using a qualitative research approach, my research paper argues that Nwapa, in *Idu*, exposes that the Nigerian pre-colonial association of hegemonic masculinity with 'virility' proves to be harmful, too powerful to be resisted, dehumanizing, and tragic. I contend that although a woman's childlessness is presented to be equally painful, the novel sheds more light on the complexity of male infertility, and uses the ironic narrative as a mechanism to contest pre-colonial indigenous constructions of manhood in the Igbo society, redefining the Igbos' attachment to producing children.

Keywords: masculinities, crisis, oppressed, patriarchy

1. Introduction

Nwapa is an iconoclastic female novelist, whose work strives to subvert Igbo culture's valorization of procreation, as a source of fulfilment for the Igbo woman, such as in *Efuru* (1966), *One is Enough* (1981), and *Women Are Different* (1986). Notwithstanding, in her second novel *Idu* (1970), Nwapa turns her attention not only to in/fertile women, but also to sterile men, by giving considerable attention to issues of masculinity. Ultimately, Nwapa makes us recognize that an exploration of the issue of male childlessness is necessary if we are to fully understand the gender issues undergirding her second novel, *Idu*.

Flora Nwapa's novel, *Idu*, has frequently been submitted to feminist analyses. Much of the criticism written on Nwapa's work has been justifiably influenced by feminist perspectives because of the woman-centered nature of her fiction. It would be quite difficult to argue that the novel is not feminist. Indeed, Nwapa herself has acknowledged that the main reason of her writing is to write women's stories. The themes of gender, the lives, and roles of women in society, the effects of patriarchy on women, and the issues of reproduction and fecundity as a cultural imperative are prominent throughout the novel, *Idu*. In their studies of masculinities in Africa, Robert Morrell and Lahoucine Ouzegane (2005) argue that "While a great deal of attention is paid to womanhood and motherhood, there is no equivalent discussion of manhood and fatherhood" (6). Likewise, analysis of male characters' experiences, particularly, the issue of fatherhood, in Nwapa's *Idu*, remains yet to be explored.

Drawing on Nwapa's representations of pre-colonial definitions of West African manhood, I will examine the interrelated ways of the male characters' perception and yet distinctive ways of responding to pre-colonial hegemonic masculinity represented in *Idu*. Moreover, this chapter explores the narrative irony used by Nwapa to redefine notions of producing children, contest polygamy, and interrogate indigenous pre-colonial constructions of manhood in the novel.

This paper argues that Nwapa, in *Idu*, exposes that the Nigerian pre-colonial association of hegemonic masculinity with 'virility' proves to be harmful, too powerful to be resisted, dehumanizing, and tragic. I attempt to demonstrate that although a woman's childlessness is presented to be equally painful, the novel sheds more light on the complexity of male infertility, and uses the ironic narrative as a mechanism to contest pre-colonial indigenous constructions of manhood in the Igbo society, redefining the Igbos' attachment to producing children.

2. "How can a man live without children?": The Unstable Adiewere between 'Conformity' and 'Resistance'

"She [Idu] was not pregnant, she had not even miscarried. It had worried her husband in the first year, but he was in love with his wife and he did not want to marry another wife" (16 my emphasis).

In the Igbo pre-colonial context addressed in *Idu*, the major expected attribute of being a 'true' man is virility. This presumption of masculinity is, however, subject to several complications, many of which are addressed or suggested in *Idu*. The most highlighted complication in the novel is childlessness. The novelist succeeds in portraying Adiewere as a complex male figure who is essentially amiable, but still childless. Nwapa, in this novel, devotes her imagination to the childless man's attempt to reach self-fulfillment correlated with an impossibility of resisting pre-colonial notions of fatherhood.

Therefore, *Idu* shows its male protagonist, Adiewere, in a state of dilemma: he attempts to resist the norms by favoring his monogamous marriage and love, but at the same time, he is worried about his position as a childless man. This is first and foremost shown through focalization and the use of stream of consciousness, as the epigraph illustrates. The first section scrutinizes the ways in which the conflicting feelings of doubt, anxiety, patience, and rejection of polygamy shape Adiewere's response towards childlessness. This ongoing oscillation of feelings underlies Adiewere's tension between 'anxiety' and 'love', the 'self' and the 'community', and 'conformity' and 'resistance'.

In *Idu*, notions of pre-colonial normative masculinity, an understanding of what constitutes society's sense of 'true' manhood, unfold from the start of the narrative. In an environment in which sexual potency for men and childbearing for women are imperatives, the author depicts Adiewere and his wife Idu as rich, but childless, thus challenging normative notions of masculinity and femininity. Through the female characters Nwasobi, Uzoechi, and Onyemuru (the old women of the community), the pre-colonial Igbo society's gender norms are presented: "“But what worries me now is that they still have no child ... It's time she was. What's wrong?”" (3). Through this direct monologue, the two female characters express their concern for the couple's childlessness. Equally, they are represented as symbols of the pre-colonial norms of the Ogwuta community. Likewise, Nwapa's *Idu* reflects the same beliefs of the rural community in Ugwuta (or Oguta) in Igboland at the end of the 1940s. The old female characters articulate the conventional expectations of womanhood, while manhood is hinted at when questioning, "“how can a man live without children? Wasn't it a woman who bore him in her womb?”" (35). In the two rhetorical questions, the motive in the reference to both 'man' and 'woman', is not to mention the cyclical function of reproduction. Rather, it emphasizes on Onyemuru's stress on the necessity to preserve the reciprocal social meaning attached to this function: 'manhood' and 'womanhood'. As such, Nwapa asserts that virility figures powerfully in hegemonic masculinity from the start of the novel.

Consequently, the novel pushes to the extreme a sense of anxiety and fear of humiliation due to the social meaning attached to male fertility as a form of hegemonic masculinity. This is manifest through the omniscient narrator's stream of consciousness. The protagonist male character, Adiewere, is presented as anxious and uncertain not only from the start of the novel, but also from the start of his marriage. According to the narrator, Adiewere starts to worry about his manhood in his first year of marriage to his wife, Idu. His worry, as the epigraph illustrates, is explicitly detectable when the third person omniscient narrator recounts: "she [Idu] was not pregnant, she had not even miscarried. It had worried her husband in the first year" (16 my emphasis). The image of the childless man that emerges from this veiled language is that of one tormented. The worry to which the narrator refers to seems to be intensified when Idu has not even miscarried, which would prove Adiewere as a 'real' man. The narrator's reference to 'miscarriage' is significant. The term 'miscarriage' would normally designate 'loss', but in this context, it has a symbolic meaning as a proof of manhood. Therefore, the absence of both miscarriage and pregnancy culminates in Adiewere's anxiety since the first year of his marriage. Through the fear of the loss of the most defining element of manhood and masculinity, Nwapa affirms that virility is, indeed, the ultimate definer of hegemonic masculinity.

Also, in the quote, "he was in love with his wife" (16), a tension in Adiewere's feelings can be detected. To begin with, Nwapa uses focalization to reflect how Adiewere is a devoted husband despite his wife's childlessness. Moreover, focalization is effective in revealing how Adiewere's love for Idu enables him to see her from an angle different from that of the old women of the community. The old female character Nwasobi interprets the couple's childlessness by putting the blame on Idu, "“Sometimes when a woman starts with money children run away”" (3). According to this perspective, a financially successful woman is a barren woman, foregrounding how the community blames the woman for a fruitless marriage. In contrast to this viewpoint, there is no scene in the novel where Adiewere puts the blame on Idu. Instead of blaming Idu, Adiewere believes that children are in "the hands of God" (15). As it stands, the novel shows that his perception of Idu's worth as a woman is not solely mediated by her reproductive function. Moreover, a degree of openness and comprehension is perceptible in the relationship when he comforts Idu, "“I don't want you to start crying tonight because you have no child ...

My mother is dead. My only brother is Ishiodu, and he does not count for much. So don't worry'" (16). In contrast to the harsh treatment Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) receives from her first husband, Adiewere is portrayed as a caring husband.

Ironically, Nwapa subverts the old women's viewpoint and concern through the couple's happiness. Despite that Idu and Adiewere do not epitomize Igbo traditional expectations of producing children, the couple is happy. Nwapa aims to reveal that happiness can be reached without children. She depicts his love for Idu as more increasing through time, "'you are as light as a feather. You get lighter and lighter every day, you are very pleasing to my eyes'" (20). Adiewere, in this simile, expresses overtly his continuous admiration of his wife. The lighter she gets, the more he loves her. The comparative description of light ('light', 'lighter', 'lighter') is immediately followed by time ('every day'). This sentence structure is deliberately repeated, foregrounding Adiewere's increasing admiration ('pleasing') of his wife. This also indicates that Adiewere overlooks Idu's infertility, and he is, instead, interested in her as a woman not a mother figure. Therefore, in his vision, she is more important than having children. The couple bond so loosely that the old women of the community comment on their happiness, wondering whether Adiewere and Idu quarrel as all couples, "You never see them quarrel. Don't they ever quarrel?" (2). Their remark reflects the uniqueness of the couple: The childless couple is always careful not to be seen quarrelling by anyone. In this way, the novel subverts the couple's childlessness by happiness and love. Moreover, using irony, Nwapa disrupts the belief that children are everything in life when Idu is so heartbroken on learning of the death of her husband and dies the same day. Death, here, has a symbolic meaning which is used to highlight that for Adiewere and Idu, marriage is seen in terms of love, appreciation, faithfulness, rather than procreation and childbearing.

Furthermore, Adiewere's attempt to resist the community's norms is reflected using analogy and Adiewere's fixed focalisation, epitomizing his rejection of polygamy and his belief in time as a feasible resolution to their childlessness. In the novel, what can solve the problem of male infertility is the possibility of taking a second wife, as it is the norm in the community, "'if Idu can't have a child, let her allow her husband to marry another wife. That's what our people do. There are many girls around'" (33). Yet, as the narrator has mentioned, Adiewere rejects polygamy because "he was in love with his wife" (16). In another episode, the narrator recounts that:

Many people had advised him to marry another, but he had refused. He was not at heart a polygamist. His father had married only his mother, as he told his friends who wanted him to marry another wife. But his father's one wife was understandable. He was not, by their standards, a rich man. He could not afford a second wife although bride-price was not high in their town. If he could have afforded it, he would have married another wife (16).

As the passage shows, Adiewere refuses polygamy despite his age-group's insistence. In addition, his vision distinguishes him not only from his peers but also from that of his father. In contrast to his father who was monogamous because of his financial inability, Adiewere is depicted as a rich businessman, but monogamous. Such a comparison foregrounds Adiewere's different perspective towards his childlessness through his patience. In this way, Nwapa's use of analogy allows us to compare Adiewere's personality traits to the those of the community's people as well as to his father. Arguably, the novel's reference to the two different generations foregrounds that polygamy is not a generational issue. Both his father and Adiewere's peers think in the same way. This, instead, can be interpreted as an emphasis on Adiewere's uniqueness, reflecting Nwapa's idealization of his qualities. Rather than simply reacting to his wife's infertility by leaving her or marrying another woman, the couple attempts to overcome their childlessness through their focus on the future. Together, they work hard and make plans to build their new house, "'If trade continues like this till the end of this season, we shall be able to start on our new house. We must start the out-house'" (15). That Adiewere rejects polygamy despite being rich can be interpreted as an implicit response to the community. In the novel, Adiewere, then, seems to respond to the Igbo values of producing children and its relationship with hegemonic masculinity through his rejection of polygamy.

However, Adiewere's resistance remains limited as the sense of doubt and fear of 'shame' and 'gaze' cannot be diminished. Rather, it persists through time as Idu shows no sign of pregnancy. The same feeling in Adiewere's first year of marriage mentioned by the narrator earlier is experienced after three years. It is addressed in another episode using a direct monologue and allusion in a scene when he informs Idu that his brother is expecting to have a fourth child. He says, "'am your husband, do you hear? I am the one to get worried, not you ... please don't weep tonight, Idu, you know what I feel about this already'" (my emphasis 16). Using allusion, the novel

removes the shroud of silence that torments Adiewere's consciousness by revealing his feelings and thoughts about producing children and his manhood. Worrying about his wife's childlessness indicates also Adiewere's internalization of the community's norms of manhood. Moreover, Adiewere's emphasis on his position as the 'husband' reveals the extent to which he is concerned as a childless man. According to his perception, he is more affected than Idu. What he perceives differently corresponds to the fact that Idu has no mother-in law to blame her. Moreover, Adiewere's brother, Ishiodu does not interfere in the relationship. This indicates the role women, particularly, mothers-in-law, play in oppressing other women. Besides, Adiewere's vision manifests his awareness of the problem of emasculation that sterile men face in a patriarchal society. Ultimately, this claim justifies the persistence of Adiewere's nervousness if Idu is not pregnant. The equation of childlessness to tragedy, in the novel, is further illustrated through the suicide of the sterile male character Amarajeme.

3. The tragedy of the sterile man

In section three, I will demonstrate the effectiveness of tragedy in interrogating both of Amarajeme's tragic flaw and the community's dehumanization of sterile men. I argue that Nwapa expresses anxiety about the paralysing consequences of hegemonic masculinity that leads Amarajeme to his tragic end. Amarajeme's tragic flaw lies in his succumbing to the dominant modes of masculine construction, which culminate in his inability to acknowledge his impotency and leads to his tragic suicide. Therefore, Nwapa aims to usher new social arrangements into being, namely ones that support an acceptance of the 'sterile man by the 'self' as well as the 'community'.

In *Idu*, Amarajeme is shown to constitute himself through virility, a critical feature of masculinity in Igbo society as constructed by its social structures. Governed by the prevailing discourses of masculinity, Amarajeme appears mainly to define himself as a virile man. Unlike Adiewere, Amarajeme is portrayed as never having doubted his 'virility': "the thought that there might be something wrong with his virility was pushed aside" (130). His denial of the possibility that his virility could be in question stands as a metaphor for his longing for 'power' and 'authority'. By formulating his masculinity around his virility, Amarajeme represents a manifestation of masculinity in line with Igbo masculine norms. At this stage in the novel, Amarajeme represents a notion of masculinity complicit with the Igbo patriarchy. Nwapa questions this construction of masculinity on multiple levels.

In his construction of masculinity, Amarajeme is implicitly shown to exercise power over his wife through his refusal to recognise his sterility. In a conversation between Idu and Amarajeme's wife, we learn that Amarajeme denies his sterility and instead chooses to put the blame on his wife: "I went to Ogwagara . . . He told me my husband was not a man, and that as long as I stayed with him, I would not have a child. I came back and told my husband this and we quarrelled over it. He went to another dibia he said Ogwagara was wrong" (145). Through this conversation, Nwapa calls the reader's attention to Ojiugo's hesitancy and silence, which together allow Amarajeme to practise assertiveness through his denial of his disempowerment. As a result of Amarajeme's denial, the relationship, I would argue, is represented as abusive towards Ojiugo.

The process of Amarajeme's emasculation begins with Ojiugo's departure. His wife leaving shifts him from a position of comfort into one of vulnerability and fear, from illusion into reality: "I went in, there was none of her belongings in the room. Fear overcame me, Idu and Adiewere, fear overcame me. I shivered, I staggered and fell . . . where could I go that night? I was helpless" (108-9 [emphasis added]). The phrase 'fear overcame me' is ambiguous. It seems intended as an expression of his feelings, yet the phrase is not followed up by any more details. Rather, the expression is truncated, and fear assumes the subject position of the sentence. It is fear that is carrying out the act of 'overcoming' while Amarajeme, as the object, is disempowered. As a result, he 'shivered', 'staggered', and 'fell'. Despite trying to hide his fear, Amarajeme is betrayed by his body when Idu and Adiewere advise him to focus on his business and forget what has happened: "Amarajeme shook his head. He bit his finger and started shaking his legs again. Now tears rolling down his cheeks" (111). His shaking legs indicate that his emotional agitation exceeds the control of his mind; it is expressed in his body against his will. In other words, the turmoil in his mind is beyond his control. The weakness of his body stands as a metaphor for his actual 'disempowerment', echoing the beginning of his tragedy.

However, adopting illusion as a means of engaging with hegemonic masculinity is demonstrated to be highly problematic. This is shown when Onyemuru reappears and makes clear the failure of Amarajeme's effort to redefine his masculinity. Amarajeme's crisis peaks with Onyemuru's announcement that Ojiugo has given birth to a son. Lowering her voice, Onyemuru asks Amarajeme to take the news calmly. In contrast to Amarajeme,

Onyemuru embodies hidden meaning, as she not only knows more about Ojiugo's departure, but also has an actual link to Ojiugo as her friend. Although not yet aware of Onyemuru's news, Amarajeme intuitively feels the nature of it: "she was bringing bad news. She always brought bad news" (109). In other words, as Onyemuru enters the spectacle of Amarajeme's crumbling masculinity, she transforms herself from news 'bringer' to an 'observer'. Consequently, via the figure of Onyemuru, the novel criticises Amarajeme's masculinity as illusory and shallow and suggests self-acceptance instead of denial.

Amarajeme's pretension of manhood is severely undermined by Nwapa. Amarajeme's 'imagined' identity, in the end, is shattered by an ineluctable shock. Compared with earlier scenes, in which he perceives himself with confidence, the scene in which Onyemuru tells him about Ojiugo's new baby leaves him confounded and pretends to be uncertain of what he is: "why did she leave me, Onyemuru? Am I not the father of the boy? Am I not?" (129). Amarajeme's self-questioning recapitulates his gradual displacement from 'illusion'. Therefore, his belief in 'virility', as the only connection between his 'self' and the structures of hegemonic masculinity in the novel, is eventually shown to be an obstruction between Amarajeme and 'reality'. He briefly questions himself, disentangling his thinking mind from the illusion: "But wait, why then did she leave me? Why then?". However, he then "recollected himself" (130). The brute consciousness is restricted to what is clear and thus to the present moment. Onyemuru makes him aware that his imagined identity cannot be sustainable. Amarajeme has spent his primal strength on journeying towards one direction; he lacks the spirit to reverse his course: "He lived alone. In spirit he was dead, but he lived on" (127). Amarajeme's new state of being reveals the limits of adopting illusion instead of reality by dramatizing his fear and despair. His pretension is severely undermined by the narrator's commentary: "Why should Amarajeme worry himself? If he was not a man he was not a man. The gods had made him so, and so he would be" (126). Nwapa thereby demonstrates the risk of an imagined identity.

Ultimately, by impregnating Ojiugo, Obokudi completes the emasculation of his friend Amarajeme. Even Amarajeme's 'power' in terms of financial status carries little weight. As Amarajeme declares, "I am stronger. I am richer than Obokudi" (110); he recognizes the inferiority with a woman who is ready to "do anything to have one, anything" (56), to prove her womanhood. For Amarajeme, becoming an object of subordination undermines the conventional delineation of masculine norms. A relation of 'power', far from being one-sided and fixed, is 'mobile', 'modifiable', and 'reversible'; the person over whom power is exercised can resist. Nwapa demonstrates that the presence of resistance in any relation of power makes the constitution of masculinity, in terms of the assertion of authority, challenging and can even place masculinity in question. An important point which Nwapa emphasises in *Idu* is that a man's identity can become dependent on a woman, and should that happen, the man's position is inverted, shifting from a position of dominance to one of subordination. While Ojiugo's subject position changes from that of the socially invalid barren woman to the legitimate status of a mother, Amarajeme is emasculated.

In addition to his tragic flaw [denial of his sterility], Amarajeme's tragic end is also depicted in part because of the discourses which define masculinity in terms of 'virility'. He is eliminated both by natural selection and by society. Through Amarajeme, Nwapa demonstrates the difficulty of resisting the discourses that permeate the subject. Amarajeme pursues these norms of masculinity until the end, at which point he is unable to exist outside the structures of the Igbo community and their pertinent discourses. His life is woven into that of the community. In this respect, Amarajeme represents Nwapa's growing preoccupation with how such discourses constrain individuals, causing them suffering and humiliation.

Feeling emasculated, this time under the direct gaze of the patriarchal community, in which all members are observing his humiliation, Amarajeme confines himself inside the house. The detachment of Amarajeme from the world is rendered both physically and socially. The house forms a tangible spatial boundary that cuts him off from the outside. Being enclosed in a woman's 'interior' space stands as a metaphor for Amarajeme's actual feminization. His detachment from the community is further emphasised in his abandoning of his business: "I have not been going. I have no strength to go" (131). The 'strength' Amarajeme refers to is not physical. The strength he refers to is psychological, and indeed that part of him is now overpowered by the power of 'shame'. His attempt to distance himself from the community inevitably circles back to the inescapable intertwinement of the self with others. His detachment from the outside environment is thus symptomatic of the alienation inflicted on sterile men.

Denied the possibility of re-integrating into the community due to the power of the 'gaze', Amarajeme finally commits suicide, an act that epitomizes the impossible resolution of 'illusion' and 'reality', 'impotency' and 'manhood'. Moreover, that Amarajeme commits suicide fourteen days after Ojiugo has given birth can also be interpreted as an implicit resistance to the community, as he "had polluted the goddess of the land" (147). It can be understood as clear evidence of his final rejection of his 'real' self: "Amarajeme hated himself. He was not pleasing to himself" (146). By contextualizing Amarajeme's response in this way, Nwapa in *Idu* stresses the importance of realistic assumptions and acceptance of the sterile man by both the self and the community.

4. Conclusion

Although fate and biological factors are significant determinants in the characters' lives, Nwapa emphasizes the role that social forces play in the shaping of male characters' subjectivity. This research paper found that the Nigerian pre-colonial association between hegemonic masculinity and male reproduction is portrayed as devastating. Adiewere and Amarajeme's inability to produce children, which is not deliberate self-marginalisation, provokes anxiety, fear, and arouses a feeling of shame. While Adiewere becomes a father and manages to escape his subordinate position in the masculine hierarchy, Amarajeme is victimised by hegemonic patterns of Igbo manhood. Therefore, these masculine expectations are shown to be necessary for being accepted within the West African societies and are, therefore, difficult to escape or renounce. Those who articulate alternatives or unwillingly stand outside of these discourses, such as Amarajeme in Nwapa's *Idu*, are indefinable, treated as unmanly, and become subject to ridicule. In being subjected to judgment in cases of disconformity, male characters strive to discipline themselves to conform with hegemonic masculinity. I contend that Nwapa's inability to envisage ways of formulating masculinity other than those offered by the prevailing norms of the Igbo society of the first half of the twentieth century suggests the impossibility of defining oneself outside the domain of Igbo structures and discourses.

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